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JESUS' WORK IN GALILEE: THE BEGINNINGS OF OPPOSITION¹

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Jesus' earlier ministry is characterized by the preponderance of works of healing over teaching. The healing ministry of the Master has never yet been adequately treated. Its extent is little realized. Even a little study of the events of those early days surprises us in their revelation of the nature, frequency, extent, and significance of his beneficent activity (Mark 1:21-34, 39; 2:1-12; 11:4-5; Luke 5:12-26; 7:2-17; Matt. 8:1-17; 8:28-34; 9:1-8; 9:18-35; John 4:46-54; 5:1-9).

Whatever the fundamental purpose of these works of healing power, one thing is very evident from the records—they attracted large crowds to the Master and lifted him high upon the wave of a great popularity. The cumulative force of the many statements made by the evangelists regarding this result of Jesus' miracles is exceedingly impressive (Mark 1:33, 37, 45; 2:2, 13; 3:7-12; Luke 4:14, 15, 42; 5:1, 15, 17; 7:17; Matt. 4:24, 25; 8:16; 9:8, 31, 36).

The popularity thus achieved by Jesus had two very far-reaching results. On the one hand, it so increased his work that he was led to select and systematically train a band of disciples who should multiply his effectiveness in dealing with the physical and spiritual needs of the multitudes that thronged about him. On the other hand, the numbers in the crowds drawn to Jesus and their growing enthusiasm for him awoke the envy and fear of the Jewish religious leaders and led them to organize definitely to counteract his influence and ultimately to compass his death.

This opposition to Jesus was not a sudden thing. It was gradual,

¹ This study covers the International Uniform Sunday-School Lessons for May 15, 22, 29, and June 5.

and its growth, a marked characteristic of these early days, is deserving of more than passing notice as an understanding of it is necessary to an intelligent grasp of later events.

The Jerusalem Pharisees were the self-constituted censors of all religious movements among their own people, not initiated by themselves. They had sent an investigating committee to John the Baptist during the early days of his ministry to inquire into his history, the nature of his message, and the validity of his credentials (John 1:19-28). This same critical, suspicious attitude met Jesus as he began his public ministry introduced by John and, at first, voicing John's message. From this time to the death of Jesus we may trace a gradual transformation in the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes from natural suspicion and silent criticism, through irritation, envy, and anger, to open criticism, covert and open attack, and foul conspiracy. Much is revealed in the plain statements of the record, but much more can be read between the lines.

If we accept the two cleansings of the temple as recorded in John 2:13-22 and Mark 11:15-19, we have in the former the *beginning* of Pharisaic antagonism to Jesus. His act of reforming zeal in driving out the temple desecrators was not only an attack upon these offenders but also an attack upon the priests who profited by the sales in the temple courts and a virtual rebuke of the religious leaders whose duty it was to keep God's house sacred and who had neither the courage nor the piety to remove these abominations themselves. That an upstart from Galilee should thus force them into public humiliation was bad enough; that he thus assumed messianic prerogatives, was unpardonable effrontery and a challenge, while his mystifying reply to their demand for a sign did not tend to placate their rising irritation. This bold young fanatic would bear watching.

The only other direct reference we have to the opposition of the Pharisees of Jerusalem during this early period that closes with the crisis at Capernaum after the feeding of the five thousand occurs in connection with the healing of the infirm man at the pool on the Sabbath (John 5:1-47). Because Jesus broke the Sabbath and also made himself equal with God, the Jews persecute him and seek to kill him (John 5:16-18). Some explanation is necessary regarding the cause for this seemingly sudden and unreasonable determination

upon Jesus' death. We find it in the history of his recorded relations with the Pharisees and scribes *outside* of Jerusalem with whom, however, the Jerusalem leaders were in close communication.

Shortly after the inauguration of Jesus' work in Capernaum we find Jesus in conflict with the authorities upon the occasion of the healing of the paralytic (Matt. 9:2-8; and parallels). A committee is on the spot to watch the Master's actions and note his utterances. Evidently this committee is a special arrangement of the *Jerusalem* authorities, as Luke informs us that "there were Pharisees and doctors of the law sitting by which were come out of every village of Galilee, and Judea and Jerusalem" (Luke 5:17). Jesus' claim to the power of forgiving sin awakens within their minds the charge of blasphemy against him, though the charge is not uttered, while the actual cure of the afflicted man put forward by Jesus as a proof of his power in the spiritual realm fails to convince those who do not want to be convinced and only confirms them in the belief that Jesus is a dangerous character.

About the same time Jesus offends the social taste and the ceremonial usage of the Pharisees in Galilee by eating with publicans and sinners, the disreputable folk of the time. By thus flying in the face of the dictates of current etiquette and religion Jesus incurs grave displeasure (Matt. 9:9-13), and provokes an attempt on the part of the Pharisees to discredit him with his disciples (Mark 2:16). It is only a short while after this event that we find the Pharisees sending on its blighting way this bit of gossip with its dangerous half-truth—"He is a gluttonous man, a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners" (Matt. 11:19).

But it is Jesus' fine disregard of traditional customs that had lost their real significance which precipitates matters in Galilee as also in Judea. The failure of Jesus and his disciples to observe the customary fasts, which even John's disciples observed, awakens a questioning which has within it a charge of disrespect, irreverence, and disobedience to age-long custom (Matt. 9:14-17). For the disciples of Jesus to neglect these facts was bad enough, but for Jesus, esteemed a rabbi, to justify the neglect was startling and most reprehensible. Nor was this all. In the parables of the patches and the wine skins, spoken in connection with this event, Jesus in effect

tells them that fasting may be a good thing for John and for them with their spirit and their beliefs. "I, however, have come to bring a *new* spirit into religious life and that spirit must find its own forms of expression. You cannot mix the two" (Matt. 9:16, 17). They understood him, as he intended that they should, to set himself against the current forms of religious life, and this, on the part of a popular leader, they resented and opposed.

More important to the Pharisee and scribe than fasting was the keeping of the Sabbath. This was distinctive of the Jewish religious life. In the effort to separate the Jews most completely from the gentiles the Sabbath command had received an infinite number of burdensome and meaningless applications. The Pharisees prided themselves upon the punctilious observance of these multitudinous rules and made their strict observance the test of a man's religious life. They watched very closely, therefore, this man who so fearlessly rode over their traditions in other respects. The opportunity for criticism here soon came. His disciples were walking through a cornfield on the Sabbath day and being hungry pulled some of the grain (a phase of threshing, and so illegal) and ate (Matt. 12:1-8). The Pharisees complain to Jesus who heartily justifies his disciples in the violation of the letter of the law, appealing to an event in David's life and to the case of priests who labor on the Sabbath in the temple as occasions when the letter of the law was violated. These actions were not only allowed but approved. It angered the Pharisees to have the heart thus taken out of their charge but more still to have Jesus put himself and his disciples on the same plane with David, the Lord's anointed, and with the priests of the temple. When, however, he went even farther and declared that the Sabbath was made for man's benefit and not the reverse, which idea their burdensome rules implied, and that he, the Son of Man (itself a messianic claim), was lord also of the Sabbath, we can imagine that their rage knew no bounds.

A little later, perhaps the very next Sabbath, a special committee of the scribes and Pharisees is waiting at the synagogue for the purpose of finding further evidence against Jesus (Matt. 12:9-14). Jesus, seeing them in their critical mood and also seeing a man near by in great physical need, boldly forces the issue. He anticipates

any criticism by asking them the direct question: "Is it legal on the Sabbath day to do good or to do harm?" (Mark 3:4). They found themselves caught on a very uncomfortable dilemma and they had the humiliation of keeping silence or facing a worse humiliation by attempting an answer. The appeal Jesus then made to their moral sense in its right to interpret the Sabbath command fell short because their hearts were "hardened." For the first time, so far as any record is concerned, Jesus is angry with them (Mark 3:5), and they, too, are filled with madness (Luke 6:11). They leave the synagogue, hunt up the Herodians, erstwhile their enemies—a party of Jews in favor of the Herodian rule—and together they lay their plans for putting Jesus out of the way. Matters have now reached the same crisis in Galilee as in Judea, the Pharisees and scribes are determined upon the death of Jesus (John 5:17; Matt. 12:14).

Thus far we have noted only the direct references to the antagonism of the Pharisees and scribes. Other events, however, occurred which had great influence in intensifying the hatred that finally determined upon Jesus' death. Time and space permit only an enumeration of the more significant of these facts—the choice of the publican Matthew, a hated tax-collector, to be one of Jesus' disciples (Matt. 9:9-15); the inauguration of a religious movement by Jesus without consulting them in the matter; the very choice of *twelve* men so easily symbolic of the twelve tribes awakened suspicion (Mark 3:13-19); the nature of the kingdom which he preached so different in its spiritual essence from the mechanical, material, and political conception they held and advanced (Matt., chaps. 5-7, and elsewhere); his unhesitant and sympathetic relations with the Samaritans (John, chap. 4) and with the gentiles (Matt. 8:5-13); his claim of superiority to Moses and tradition (Matt., chap. 5), and of messiahship as indirectly made by his act of cleansing the temple (John 2:13-22); his usage of the term "Son of Man," applying it to himself (Matt. 8:20; 9:6; 12:8), and his reference to messianic prophecy as fulfilled in his own ministry (Luke 4:16-21); his warnings against the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees and the evident charges of unreality, evasion, ostentation, hypocrisy in their religion (Matt., chaps. 6, 7); his definite, direct attacks upon them (John 5:42 ff.); his comparison of the gentile faith with that of the Jews to the Jews'

discredit, and the picture of the future kingdom which he drew in which the hated gentile is seated with the Jewish patriarchs at the great feast while the "sons of the kingdom" are excluded (Matt. 8:5-13). Nothing is directly said in our records thus far that any one of these facts actually occasioned opposition, but, human nature being as it is, we may be sure that it was just such facts as these which materially aided in the development of the opposition of the Pharisees from an attitude of critical inquiry to one of determined and murderous antagonism, and which supply the missing links of what otherwise might seem a sudden development.

All of these facts, direct and indirect, are made more significant by the added fact of Jesus' great and growing popularity with the people. To the Pharisee, who saw plainly the issue, it was a conflict between an age-long, revered system and a powerful, fanatic, resourceful, and dangerous man.

With this situation in mind we turn to the events narrated in Matt. 12:22-45. This man who claims religious leadership so authoritatively, who draws and holds such large crowds about him and from them gains disciples both by his gracious words of authority unlike that of the scribes and Pharisees and also by his marvelous deeds of love and sympathy, arouses fresh enthusiasm by healing completely and immediately a man both blind and dumb. The multitude marvels, and the question rises spontaneously, "Is this the Messiah?" Nor is this the first time that this idea has risen in the minds of the thoughtful. They, as well as the Pharisees, remember the announcement with which John greeted Jesus on Jordan's banks, "Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29); Andrew, one of the multitude of Galilee, had spread the news to others besides his brother Peter: "We have found the Messiah" (John 1:41); even where his messiahship had not been affirmed he had been greeted as "a great prophet" (Luke 7:16) in whose ministry God had revealed himself. Nor were the cries of demonized men without their influence upon the inflammable material of the oriental mind: "Thou art the Son of God" (Luke 4:41) and "the Holy One of God" (Mark 1:24). This question then raised in the presence of the Pharisees, "Is this the Messiah?" demanded an answer. What shall they say? The miracle

can neither be denied nor explained away. They conclude to do the only thing their stubbornness and hatred can do. "Yes, the deed is wonderful! But it does not prove Jesus to be the Messiah using God's power. Far from it. It clearly shows he is in league with the prince of devils. Not God but Beelzebub is the power behind this man. Shun him, therefore, lest he use this devilish power on you." Such is the meaning of the reply of the Pharisees.

The weakness of the statement is clearly seen by the multitude in whose estimation the Pharisees by such arguments lose ground; nevertheless Jesus takes advantage of the opportunity the challenge afforded to expose further the extremity to which the Pharisees had come and to point out their great spiritual danger. With calmness and yet with intensity he exposes their real nature to themselves and to the listening crowd: "Ye offspring of vipers! Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. What then must be the moral depravity and wickedness out from which these blasphemies of yours have issued!" (Matt. 12:34).

This incident marks the first great open break between Jesus and the Pharisees. We have heard mutterings of the approaching storm and seen an occasional lightning flash, but now the fury is on and will be on until it expends itself at the cross. Jesus evidently tries no more to win the Pharisee and scribe. In fact when next we find them demanding a sign from him (Matt. 12:38-45) he does not argue nor deal gently but absolutely refuses, and with great feeling calls upon them, the religious leaders, to *repent* in the presence of One—himself—who is greater than Jonah in whose presence Nineveh repented, and greater than Solomon to whose words of wisdom even the Queen of Sheba attended. Here, too, he utters his first cry of doom against the evil generation to which they belonged. There is no healing of the breach after this, but a settled and increasingly intense warfare. The opposition of the Pharisees to Jesus thus begun is the most significant of all the antagonism he experienced. Yet there were other phases of opposition which he encountered that are worthy of note.

From within his own family and from among his own friends he receives opposition. Coming to believe that Jesus was mentally unbalanced because of his excessive zeal and his labor-filled hours

which left him hardly time to eat, they endeavor to restrain him in his work and to get him away from it (Mark 3:20, 21). From this time on he, no doubt, found his work among the people somewhat handicapped by their knowledge of the fact that his own relatives deemed him crazy. Undoubtedly, too, this had considerable bearing upon his attitude and words at the time the message was brought to him that his mother and brethren were asking for him (Matt. 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35).

Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, the one who had permitted the murder of John the Baptist, hears of Jesus about this time and seeks to see him (Matt. 14:1-12; Luke 9:9). On the surface, his reason seems to be that of curious speculation, but Luke 13:31, 32 shows that his intentions were deadly and thus in Herod, the reigning ruler and representative of political power, we have another element in the gathering and growing opposition which Jesus himself recognized.

One more and perhaps the most disheartening source of opposition is revealed in Matt. 14:13-23 and parallels. In spite of the opposition of scribes, Pharisees, relatives, Herod, and the Herodians, Jesus steadily gains popularity with the multitudes; his very attitude toward the scribes and Pharisees, hated by the common people, wins the allegiance of many. Wherever he goes a great crowd follows. He attempts to go with his disciples into a quiet place for a little rest, but they cannot escape the crowd with its varied needs. In compassion and self-forgetfulness Jesus heals their sick and then, because they are weary and hungry and far from home, he graciously and marvelously supplies them with an abundance of food. Nothing has ever happened that so arouses their enthusiasm. The days of Moses and the manna seem about to be repeated. This man must be the prophet long foretold (Deut. 18:15-18); certainly here in the person of this great healer and bountiful provider they had found the one above all others qualified to rule over their land and with great unanimity they try to force the kingship upon him (John 6:14, 15). But grieved at their action Jesus eludes them, and thus disappoints and grieves them. In the words that soon follow (John 6:22-58) he puts an end to their national hopes so far as he is concerned and alienates himself from them, for he declares that

his true mission is not to the body but to the soul, not to give temporal and physical life but eternal life, and furthermore indicates that this mission is not to be realized by way of a royal earthly throne but by the way of *death*.

Thus Jesus not only loses the support of some who hereafter become indifferent, but he awakens the displeasure and ill will of those who had pinned their faith upon him as the coming king (John 6:66) and who now join his detractors.

This event, the crisis at Capernaum, marks the turning-point in Jesus' ministry. Opposition has grown so strong that he gives himself no longer to the crowds and the working of miracles but to the Twelve and the work of teaching the things of the kingdom and of revealing himself to them in his true character. It costs to be a Savior, and his mission took him through bitter and prolonged opposition that long before its culmination cast the shadow of the cross upon his path.